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BOOK REVIEW

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The present book is true to its title. A collection of articles that stems from a symposium of the same name at the University of Hamburg in 2017, the authors here bring different perspectives to bear on the philosophical and historical relations between Buddhism and scepticism. Though this is relatively well-trodden ground, the insightful studies here shed new light on the matter. We find historical studies of the possible links between Pyrrhonism and Buddhism (Halkias and Kuzminski); a defense of Nāgārjuna’s philosophical scepticism as of the Pyrrhonian variety (Mills); considerations of the role of sceptical doubt in less expected places, such as in Dharmakīrti’s (Eltschinger) and Vasubandhu’s (Hanner) approaches to scriptural authority and hermeneutics; a fascinating look at the uses of scepticism in the works of Buddhist modernists, from the Critical Buddhism of Matsumoto Shirō and Hakamaya Noriaki to Stephen Batchelor’s “Buddhism without beliefs” (Shields); and a provocative critique of the whole project of comparing Buddhism and scepticism in the first place (Siderits). Hanner’s introduction lucidly sets up the volume and briefly summarizes each essay, and each contributor is keenly attuned to the many senses “scepticism” might have, carefully discerning Pyrrhonian scepticism, radical or Academic scepticism, religious scepticism, and so on. Whatever your proclivities, there is something here for anyone interested in Buddhism and scepticism.

Yet that conjunction--Buddhism *and* scepticism--should strike us as odd. The volume highlights this strangeness: a question that recurs throughout a number of the contributions concerns just how philosophers belonging to a religious tradition, one that variously defines itself by ethical and soteriological claims (not to mention claims regarding rebirth and the authority of the Buddha’s words), can be usefully characterized as “sceptical.” Take, for instance, the most prominent member of the so-called epistemological tradition of Indian Buddhist philosophy, Dharmakīrti. In his contribution, “Beyond Reasonable

Doubt? A Note on Dharmakīrti and Scepticism,” Vincent Eltschinger finds Dharmakīrti to be squarely opposed to forms of radical scepticism in at least one fundamental sense: his view of knowledge is *optimistic* (p. 38), in that the way things really are is ultimately knowable “by various types of personalities, from omniscient buddhas to much lower types of mystics and spirituals” (p. 44). Yet there is nevertheless an acknowledgment in Dharmakīrti’s work that that way things really are is, for our ordinary, unliberated cognition, radically imperceptible (*atyantaparokṣa*). This means that the “judicious person” (*prekṣāvāt*) inhabiting *saṃsāra* has no choice but to rely on religious revelation that will remain characterized by a certain degree of uncertainty until it bears fruit in some form of extraordinary gnosis. Framing Dharmakīrti as ultimately opposed to the sceptic, and yet in a comparable position regarding scriptural claims and religious practice, complicates our picture of an epistemologist whom we might expect should be exclusively opposed to sceptical doubt.

The consideration of doubt and scripture is picked up again in Oren Hanner’s insightful and detailed treatment of Vasubandhu in “Scripture and Scepticism in Vasubandhu’s Exegetical Method.” Quite unlike the case of the Pyrrhonian sceptic, Hanner shows that doubt is, for Vasubandhu, an eminently undesirable and unpleasant mental state (pp. 140–141). As Hanner sums it up, “Vasubandhu is far from being an adherent of an all-embracing sceptical worldview” (p. 156). Yet doubt has an important place in Vasubandhu’s hermeneutics. So long as it is properly directed, doubt can be put into the service of religious devotion. The Buddha’s words themselves are flawless and perfectly reliable. Vasubandhu is clear on this. Yet the Buddha is gone and his “teachings are thrown into disorder by poor, careless dialecticians” (p. 135), and so *our reception of the Buddha’s words is anything but perfect*. Entertaining sceptical objections, then, leads to a refinement of our interpretation of scripture. Vasubandhu’s is a “religious scepticism” (p. 131), or, in Richard Nance’s phrase, a “‘devoted criticism’ [...] whose purpose is restoring faith through a rational inquiry into the scriptures” (p. 136). By assessing examples of Vasubandhu’s critical practice in the *Vyākhyāyukti*, *Dharmadharmatāvibhāgavṛtti*, and *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, Hanner carefully shows the many uses to which this religious scepticism might be put. In the end, we see that “to preserve the authority of the Buddha’s words, Vasubandhu channels all sceptical inclinations towards a separate object: our understanding of Buddhist teachings, or misunderstanding thereof” (p. 157). Our reasoning might get the Buddha’s teaching right, or it might get it wrong: “scriptures, on the other hand, are intrinsically a source of true knowledge, whether they are correctly understood or not” (p. 157).

But it is not typically Vasubandhu or Dharmakīrti who gets associated with particularly Pyrrhonian scepticism. That distinction goes to Nāgārjuna. In “Nāgārjuna’s Scepticism about Philosophy,” building on his *Three Pillars of*

Skepticism in Classical India: Nāgārjuna, Jayarāsi, and Śrī Harṣa, Ethan Mills defends this reading of the founder of the Madhyamaka tradition. Mills (pp. 58–63) leans heavily on Nāgārjuna’s statements to the effect that the Mādhyamika (the proponent of Madhyamaka) aims to abandon all views, thereby reading Nāgārjuna as part of “a diverse cross-cultural club of philosophers who use philosophical methods against philosophy itself” (pp. 57). Mills argues that, just as Pyrrhonists reach tranquility (*ataraxia*) by means of withholding judgment on all non-evident matters, so Nāgārjuna’s “pacification of conceptual proliferation” (*prapañcopaśama*) is a therapeutic goal that amounts to the “purging of philosophical impulses” (p. 58), leaving the cured patient able to engage in conventional existence--religious practice included--“without belief” (pp. 70–73). Mills explains that this takes place in two phases: first, offering arguments against essence (*svabhāva*) and in favor of the universal emptiness of essence; second, “demonstrating that this idea of emptiness has the peculiar property of undermining not only all other philosophical views, but even itself” (p. 58).

Mills recognizes that the interpretation of Nāgārjuna he gives is a controversial one and that Nāgārjuna’s philosophy has always lent itself to multiple, incommensurable interpretations. The issue cannot be settled in a short review. Still, Mills defends himself against one particular line of objection concerning Buddhist soteriology that seems to me particularly incisive--and is articulated in Mark Siderits’ contribution to this very volume. With characteristic clarity and precision, Siderits raises “Some Sceptical Doubts about ‘Buddhist Scepticism’,” as his title puts it, showing that certain formal parallels between particularly Madhyamaka and Pyrrhonism do not overcome the differences between the two traditions. (It is a nice touch to *begin* the volume with Siderits’ piece.) One of his doubts concerns whether Nāgārjuna’s Buddhist soteriology--one concerned with “the cessation of existential suffering” that is “attained by extirpating all forms of an ‘I’-sense” (p. 29)--is finally reconcilable with the aims of Pyrrhonism, and whether the respective aims of these traditions can really both be grounded on the same sort of suspension of judgment. Siderits answers in the negative. As he puts it, “It is difficult to see how the Pyrrhonian practice of acquiescing in how things appear to the uninquisitive could lead to such extirpation” (p. 29). Pyrrhonian practice aims at “the tranquility that comes from no longer forming beliefs through reasoned inquiry” wherein “one conducts one’s life by acting in accordance with how things appear to one prior to inquiry” (p. 29; compare Kuzminski’s contribution, pp. 110–115). For Nāgārjuna, though, the way things appear prior to inquiry is precisely the problem. *Nirvāṇa* and *samsāra* are not the same in every respect: they are the same only to the extent that both are not ultimately real (pp. 29–30). There is a difference between the liberation from suffering reached through inquiry and the uninquisitive sense of self that causes suffering. Not only this. As Siderits argues (pp. 30–31), for

Nāgārjuna, inquiry leads to precisely the rejection of ultimate reality. There is no equivocation regarding that liberative insight. The Pyrrhonian might withhold judgment regarding metaphysical realism itself, remaining indifferent to the question of whether or not there is an ultimate reality behind the appearances. But Nāgārjuna does not. (As Siderits puts it, this is precisely “the point of the doctrine of the emptiness of emptiness. As Nāgārjuna makes clear in [*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*] 13.8cd, the mistake of taking emptiness to be a feature of ultimate reality lies in supposing that there could be such a thing as ultimate reality” [p. 30].) The important question Mills raises, then, concerning “how Nāgārjuna could possibly be a *Buddhist* philosopher if he is also a sceptic” (p. 70) would seem still to be pressing.

This brings us to the contributions of Georgios T. Halkias, “Yavanayāna: Buddhist Soteriology in the Aristocles Passage,” and Adrian Kuzminski, “The Evident and the Non-Evident: Buddhism through the Lens of Pyrrhonism.” In his report of Pyrrho’s life, Diogenes Laertius informs us that Pyrrho travelled to India with Alexander’s army, residing there between 330–327 BCE; that he exchanged philosophical views with Indian philosophers (so-called “gymnosophists”); and that these exchanges “led him to adopt a most noble philosophy” (pp. 87–90, 109–110). It is this remarkable moment of cultural exchange that has led some to argue for a direct link between Pyrrhonism and Buddhism—including Kuzminski, both here and in his previous work, *Pyrrhonism: How the Ancient Greeks Reinvented Buddhism*. (Halkias gives a helpful survey of this literature [pp. 83–86].) Through a Buddhist reading of the Aristocles passage, one of our primary documents for Pyrrho’s view (pp. 90–101), Halkias proposes that we understand both early Buddhism and Hellenistic scepticism as “comparable philosophical enterprises that share a common teleology.” His hypothesis, he continues, “is that similarities between religious formations are not, for the most part, accidental or typographical, but rather the outcome of synchronic entanglements and diachronic exchanges” (p. 85). The claim, then, is not so much that Buddhism is the source of Pyrrhonism; it is, rather, that certain undeniable resonances between the two traditions are rooted in recorded and unrecorded historical encounters and so benefit from being read in concert. His careful reading of the Aristocles passage ably demonstrates this.

Kuzminski’s contribution defends the stronger historical claim. His view is that specific doctrines of Pyrrho—particularly the Pyrrhonist tendency of “taking appearances as inescapable facts while suspending judgement on any possible reality underlying those appearances” (p. 120)—emerged from his encounter with Buddhists (pp. 115–121). Needless to say, this claim is controversial, and Kuzminski addresses some critiques of his earlier work in the course of defending it here. He also quite helpfully lays out the Pyrrhonian distinction between the evident and the non-evident in some detail (pp. 110–115), with particular reference to the way interpretation transforms “facts,” or

pragmata, “from something evident to something non-evident, to something we could be wrong about” (pp. 112). This helps to clarify just what it means to suspend judgment regarding the non-evident and to accept only appearances, thus setting the comparison with Buddhism on more solid Pyrrhonian ground.

On the evidence marshaled by Halkias and Kuzminski, it seems undeniable that Pyrrho learned *something* from his time in India. Pyrrho would have to have been a dogmatist of the highest order to have spent years abroad in the company of foreign philosophers yet not to have engaged them in critical discussion, or to have learned nothing from those engagements. But Kuzminski’s claim is stronger: distinctive Pyrrhonist claims have their origin in particular Buddhist views. But *which* Buddhist views? This is where the details of the stronger historical claim remain difficult for me to parse precisely. Most often, as exemplified in Mills’ contribution, Pyrrhonism is said to be akin to (a particular interpretation of) Nāgārjuna’s *Madhyamaka*. Though I am sympathetic to Siderits’ doubts about reading *Madhyamaka* as a form of scepticism, let’s grant that *Madhyamaka* parallels Pyrrhonism for the sake of argument. As all acknowledge, Nāgārjuna articulated his *Madhyamaka* centuries after Pyrrho’s time abroad. Still, though he appeals to the early Buddhism of the Pāli canon and the *Abhidharma*, Kuzminski seems to read these earlier traditions as commensurate with *Madhyamaka* (see especially pp. 121–124). He cites, for instance, Robin Brons’ interpretation of *Madhyamaka*--e.g., “Inherent existence (*svabhāva*) and how things are by nature simply cannot be found. *Mādhyamikas* do, however, assent to the conventional truth, which parallels Sextus’ notion of appearances” (pp. 122)--as evidence for how to understand the earlier Buddhism Pyrrho might have encountered.

However, Nāgārjuna’s *Madhyamaka* is a direct critique of earlier Buddhism, particularly as articulated in the *Abhidharma*. For *Ābhidharmikas do* hold *dharmas* to be ultimately real, partless, autonomously intelligible constituents of reality.¹ *Dharmas* are the reality underlying appearances; conventional phenomena may have no inherent existence or intrinsic meaning, but ultimately real *dharmas* do. *Ābhidharmikas* hold that form (*rūpa*), for instance, is what it is intrinsically. It has *svabhāva*. It is ultimately real because it is what it is, as Siderits puts it in his contribution, “without reliance on other simultaneously existing things” (p. 31). It’s precisely this *Ābhidharmika* foundationalism that Nāgārjuna was reacting to. But in that case, if Pyrrho is supposed to be akin to Nāgārjuna, he would have been just as opposed to the foundationalism of the *Abhidharma* as Nāgārjuna was. If Pyrrho met *Ābhidharmika* Buddhists in his time abroad, he would have found them to be dogmatists. This is not to deny the possibility of an influence of Buddhism on Pyrrho; it’s just to say things get murkier. For instance, perhaps Pyrrho was inspired by, yet reacting to, the *Abhidharma* in a way that is akin to how Nāgārjuna would react centuries later. Or else, intriguingly, perhaps there were

other Buddhists presaging Nāgārjuna's critique of Abhidharma centuries earlier than is typically thought whom Pyrrho met. (Kuzminski suggests something along these lines [p. 123].) If that's so, though, little textual evidence of their views has come down to us.

This brings us, finally, to the contribution of James Mark Shields, "Sceptical Buddhism as Provenance and Project," which questions anew just what we're doing when we endeavor to read Buddhism as sceptical in the first place. Shields brings us squarely into the 20th and 21st centuries, with a clear eye looking toward the future. He seeks to understand "whether 'sceptical' Buddhism can coexist with Buddhist *praxis*, conceived as an engaged response to the suffering of sentient beings in a globalized and neoliberal industrial capitalist world order" (p. 161), and he finds that a progressively inclined contemporary Buddhism might find better conversation partners elsewhere in the western tradition (pp. 169–175). His critique of the uses of scepticism by Buddhist modernists like Matsumoto Shirō, Hakamaya Noriaki, and other Critical Buddhists in Japan, as well as Stephen Batchelor in Britain, opens up further possibilities for expanding our notion of just what scepticism might mean when put in conversation with Buddhism. But Shields also frames for us a fundamental set of questions. Why we are tempted to make the comparison between Buddhism and scepticism in the first place? Are we, like Matsumoto, Hakamaya, and Batchelor, aiming to remove "religious" elements from Buddhism by reframing the tradition as sceptical? If so, what are our political motives for doing so? And, as Shields puts it, "Can a truly 'sceptical' Buddhism keep to the ethical--some would argue *political*--imperative of the Buddhist path; namely, the commitment to the liberation of all beings from suffering?" (p. 167).

The essays in this volume amply show that much of philosophical and historical interest comes from further inquiry into the affinities between Buddhism and scepticism. This is perhaps especially so at one crucial place where (it still seems to me) the comparison between the two traditions breaks down: the intersection of philosophy and religion. If Siderits is right, for instance, to question whether Madhyamaka soteriology can be assimilated to Pyrrhonism, perhaps this breakdown might let us reassess the place of soteriology in Nāgārjuna's rejection of realism. Or if Pyrrho was in fact inspired by Buddhists in India, we might ask why he disregarded their religious commitments in his appropriation of their ideas and in what ways he recontextualized them in light of this disregard. Indeed, we might ask the same of ourselves as scholars. It is a strength of this collection that these and other important questions concerning not only the philosophical but also the religious and political uses of scepticism remain open. Anyone who wants to sharpen their understanding of Buddhism, scepticism, or their conjunction will have much to learn from this book.

Notes

1 - As Vasubandhu defines the ultimate reality that characterizes *dharmas*, expressing the opinion of the Kashmiri Vaibhāṣikas, “Anything the idea of which does not occur upon division or upon mental analysis, such as an object like a pot, that is a conceptual fiction [*saṃvṛtisat*]. The ultimately real [*paramārthasat*] is otherwise.” *Abhidharmakośa* 6.4, translated by Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007), p. 111. See *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, edited by Prahlad Pradhan, second edition revised by Aruna Haldar (Patna: K. P. Jayaswal Research Institute, 1975), p. 334: *yatra bhinnena tadbuddhir anyāpohe dhiyā ca tat, ghaṭārthavat saṃvṛtisat paramārthasat anyathā*. For a typical reading of Abhidharma as a defense of a form of metaphysical reductionism, see Siderits’ chapter in *Buddhism as Philosophy*, “Abhidharma: The Metaphysics of Empty Persons,” pp. 105–137.